

An Oral History

with

Ron Magee

SSC History Project

Interviewer: Martin Oramous

2006

Biography

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This is an interview by the Stennis Space Center History Office. The purpose of this interview is to document the story of key personnel during/after Hurricane Katrina at SSC. The interview is with Ron Magee and is taking place on January 19, 2006. The interviewer is Martin Oramous. Also present are Paul Foerman and Shelia Reed.

RON MAGEE: I'm Ron Magee. I am the Assistant to the Director for Center Operations and also serve as the Emergency Director during emergency situations here on site.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: When did you realize that this looks like it might be a bad one and I'm going to have start doing some things?

RON MAGEE: Well, the interesting thing was that weekend I was off in Mobile at a Men's Conference. We started having announcements come up on the screen there in the Men's Conference on Saturday that if you lived in New Orleans you had to leave in the morning. Suddenly by the afternoon, we started getting announcements saying that if you live on the Mississippi Gulf Coast you need to leave now. Not knowing, not having any news, we just got in the vans and came back to Bay St. Louis. That is where I live and started seeing what the News was really saying about the storm coming our way. We made some plans at our house. Collected some important papers that type of thing and had full intentions of staying at my parent's house which is about 21 feet above sea level. Sunday morning we went over to their house for lunch with my parents. During that lunch, we decided that we were going to leave because even though that house was very high and it had withstood Camille, we were a little concerned. Something told me that we needed to leave. So, I told my parents either they were going to come with me out to Stennis or they needed to get on the road and leave town. They decided to leave town. I decided to bring my family out to Stennis. Typically, I wouldn't come out to Stennis during a hurricane because the Emergency Coordinator for hurricanes handles all of the sheltering and ride-out crews here on site during a hurricane event. But, when I did come out, got my family situated then I had a chance to work along side the Emergency Coordinator to help out in the emergency preparations and then all during the hurricane with what we did on site.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: So, when you got out here, was it Sunday afternoon?

RON MAGEE: Yes.

MARTIN ORAMOVS: Where did you have your family?

RON MAGEE: We decided to go up to my office which is on the 3rd floor of 1100. That proved to not necessarily be a good decision later on but at the time the rest of Center Ops personnel were there. Some people from the Michoud Assembly Facility were there. So, it was more of a time where families could get together and visit. We were just doing the pre-storm getting to know each other type activity. It wasn't until the next day when the wind started getting high that we could see the effects of the winds through the windows that we knew that this was a little bit different storm than what we anticipated it to be. It's not funny but in hindsight we can look and smile at what happened. My wife and Patrick Scheuermann and others were in the office complex while I was downstairs and the windows kept flying open. They would go and pull the windows shut to try to keep the rain out. At some point they started hearing people screaming, "There's a tornado over us. You need to get out of the area." So, everybody scrambled out of the area. A few minutes later they went back in and I had skylights in my office. So, that's why I said staying in 1100 on the 3rd floor probably was not a good decision in hindsight.

MARTIN ORAMOVS: That was when the roof was torn off.

RON MAGEE: Yes.

MARTIN ORAMOVS: What was the situation that night? Were you able to sleep? Was it frightening? You woke up the next day and the storm hits. What was the situation?

RON MAGEE: I don't remember sleeping much that night. I think my children slept through the night pretty easily but I don't remember sleeping much that night. We did lay down to attempt to sleep but somehow I believe I probably got up and started going downstairs to the EOC and checking things out to see what was going on.

MARTIN ORAMOVS: So once the storm passed, everyone is trying to assess the situation. What were you faced with then?

RON MAGEE: Our first thing that we were faced with was the fact that we didn't have any communications outside the Center. So, four or five of us got in one of the utility vehicles and drove up to the Mississippi Army Ammo Plant to the Department of Energy's Facility there and they were the only ones we knew that had a satellite phone. We went and they met us at the vehicle with a satellite phone. We began to try to make phone calls up to NASA Headquarters so that we could talk to the Administrator. The problem was we had a hard time connecting but once we did connect with somebody that we knew at Headquarters then they transferred us into the Administrator's office. So, that was the first thing just to say we were O.K. There were no injuries on-site. The site seemed to have sustained it pretty well. That was before we had done our damage assessment to know what the real damage was for the Center. This was Monday late afternoon. That was the first thing we had to face was the no communications. We also had to face the fact that we lost power. We had a lot of people here that were sleeping in

our halls. People that had come to our gates and sought refuge that we of course could not turn away. We had a lot of people here that were families of employees. The best count we have is about 3,700 people were here seeking shelter but that included our ride-out crews too that were normally here during any hurricane.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: What were things that had to be done to accommodate all those people and was that part of your role?

RON MAGEE: My role was not that. Other people dealt with what to do with all the people that were here. The first challenge we had of course was to figure out how we could feed people. We had setup the cafeteria situation where people could buy food during the sheltering process. That's something we normally do but at some point we started to realize in the days that followed that we were going to run out of food. So, we had that challenge on our hands. We also had a large population of people here that had special needs. We had a lot of exceptional needs that had to be dealt with. People with medical issues. Some people that were mentally retarded and were cared for by a caregiver. There were people here with large family groups and had not brought enough supplies to anticipate an extended stay here at the Center. They had just brought what would be typically considered a day or two of supplies with them. We were dealing with a lot of the human side for the first few days with all of the people that were here.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: What was the biggest obstacle you faced?

RON MAGEE: I don't know if there was any tremendous obstacle but what we did have to do is we had some people taking care of the refugees or those that were displaced. We had other people that had to deal with our facilities and all of the critical systems that we have. We had some systems in some of our facilities that required electricity to maintain pressures and if pressures dropped too low then there would be damage to the systems. Those took a high priority but with the power grid as well as the communication grid down around us, we didn't quite know how to do all of that so we had to really hustle and get on the phone, talk to people, get the right kind of people addressing the fact that we needed those services out here. We also had FEMA and MEMA, the Mississippi Emergency Management Agency folks here with us riding out the storm. I believe that that helped a little bit in notching up the priority for our facility and also later on turning into a place where they could do their operations, coordinate their operations for the region out at Stennis.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Have you ever experienced anything like this before?

RON MAGEE: No. I was a high school student when Hurricane Camille hit the area. I remember spending many, many hours helping people clean out their houses but at that time my parent's house was not affected so we weren't affected. We really didn't have the personal tragedy that I had in this storm. In fact in this storm, that house that had never had flood waters, my parent's house had 2 feet. My house had 12 feet of water in it. So, you were dealing with your personal tragedy along with trying to sustain a viable operation out here at Stennis. Really, Stennis was not a big concern because there were a

lot of fine people working those issues here. The personal tragedy added on top of it just made it almost overwhelming. After several days of very little sleep it became almost an overwhelming thing for me and I think for a lot of other people.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: How would you categorize efforts out here as far as going into a recovery status and the things that had to be done that people aren't usually having to deal with?

RON MAGEE: Well, I think it is nothing short of heroic. The people went beyond themselves. A lot of people spent a lot of extra time and energy when they legitimately were not working in an area they didn't have to worry about it. If they knew how to do something, they volunteered to do it. We all came together as a team. The people from our support contract, Mississippi Space Services, people in NASA and the Test Complex, the Rocketdyne folks, the people from all the different companies and agencies out here I really think did their very best. They are like the best example of how to coordinate and cooperate with each other. I think people did a really good job with that.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Is there anything else that stands out or if you could look ten years into the future and this was going to happen again and there is going to be somebody in your position, personally or professionally, any advice for them?

RON MAGEE: I think as we progressed beyond the first few days, we realized that a lot of what we were doing was to try to reconstitute our facility and try to get it up and operational, trying to get the jobs restored. In the recovery for the region, it was important that we restore the jobs here at Stennis, for people to have that employment and that security of employment when many of them did not have that same security at their home because it was flooded. That was a very important role that I think we served in the community by restoring our worksite here. The lessons that I learned from this are to take these storms very seriously. I'm glad I did come out here but I was very close to not coming out here. I think most people that came out as well as those that stayed home will realize in the future that you should seek shelter away from the coastline because you just really don't know what these storms will do. This wasn't a terrifically high wind storm but everything was just right for a major flood to occur. I think that is the lesson that I learned from a personal standpoint.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Is there anything that you can think of that we haven't talked about or that stands out in your mind that you had to face or saw?

PAUL FOERMAN: One thing that I would like for you to kind of touch on Ron ... can you kind of walk us through what you did do for Emergency Operations during the storm?

RON MAGEE: While the Emergency Coordinator and the staff that normally deals with the emergencies were dealing with the people and getting our facility back in operation, I spent most of my time in the Conference Room trying to coordinate and keep up with all of the various activities that people were assigned to do. We didn't have computers setup

to do that. We didn't have the communication that we really needed. So, I resorted to the old fashion blackboard and I kept a list of all things that people were assigned to do when those things were expected to be accomplished. When the next fuel shipments were supposed to be in and we checked those off as they came in and that kept an updated status board for the first few days to try to just bring a semblance of organization to the recovery. Fortunately for us, we did have some Senior Management that did ride-out the storm here. So, we also had the real time integration with our management to allow us to make decisions to decide what was most important and what things could be put off until a later time. That is what I did the first few days after the storm, just tried to keep it organized. At some point there was relief that came in from Headquarters and other Centers that helped relieved me of some of those duties and allowed me to address my personal tragedy. I'm always grateful for the fact that they allowed me that time to leave the Center and go and look after my house and see what was happening there and making plans of what I needed to do there.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: How do you think we did and how do you think we are doing now almost five months after the storm?

RON MAGEE: Well, I think five months after of course Stennis there's a few repairs that we will still have to do here at the Center. There are a lot of plans for the future that we are in the middle of. We have decided to reconfigure some of things we were planning even this year to start building our First Response Facility. That facility now has a different look to it, additional space. All of these were based upon lessons we learned from Katrina. We also hope to be a good neighbor to our Michoud Facility down in New Orleans. Provide them some support during these events. We think that is the smart thing to do for NASA. We want to be part of that. Those are the types of things that we have now learned from; here we are five months later. We have also learned how we can better respond in the future. Some of the things that we need to do with the local community. Some of the things we need to do within NASA to be better ready for storms like this because we did take a direct hit like this into our area. The idea of having $\frac{1}{4}$ of your work force with extremely damaged homes and probably the other $\frac{3}{4}$ of your work force with minor damage to their homes. That is something that we have to think about on how we can help people more quickly so we can get them back to work. That's some of the heroics that have occurred in this whole situation. People realized that it is just not our buildings out here but it is also the buildings that house the employees that work out here that we needed to get involve with as much as we could.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: They have to have a home before they can begin doing the work.

RON MAGEE: Well, Maslow's theory. You have to take care of food and shelter. You have to do that first before you can get to the next level. I think that's where we found a lot of our employees. I found myself in that situation. I felt very confident that I would be able to work through that but everybody starts out on a different plane and everybody has to deal with these tragedies their own way and I think that the Center stepped up and did exactly what they needed to do in that area. They had a good Employee Assistance

Program setup to work with people that might have needed someone to talk to. There were people setup to help us find housing, to help us find people to help us clean out our homes. The “Stennis helping Stennis” program was just a great thing that I think helped not only NASA but every resident agency, every employee out here at Stennis. I think there were a lot of good things that came out of this that we will definitely not want to lose sight of if another type of disaster like this happens again.

MARTIN ORAMOUS: Is there anything else you can think of that stands out in your mind or that you experienced?

RON MAGEE: No, Paul is there anything else you want me to talk about?

PAUL FOERMAN: No, I think you pretty much covered everything.

RON MAGEE: Is that it? Alright, good.

(End of Interview)